

Photographers explore constructed, real environments

By JEANNE PLATT - The Buzz

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CHICO -- "They are complete fictions; these places don't exist anywhere," said Leigh Merrill of her series of meticulously composited photographs culled from thousands of digital photos of San Francisco streets and houses.

Merrill and Drew Boughton will show their photography at the 1078 Gallery in an exhibition running today through Jan. 9. Leigh Merrill will give a 6 p.m. talk at the opening reception, which runs at 5-7 p.m., on Friday. A closing reception will be held at 5-7 p.m. Jan. 9.

"I think when you look at the ways we construct our environments they show us the things we hopefully find beautiful, and give us ideas of class," Merrill said. "Because (San Francisco) is a denser area this sort of shift in class and social structure happens rapidly -- you can literally see it from block to block."

Merrill's images, largely created from pictures taken in the foggy Sunset district, showcase a world both magical and unsettling. There's the painstakingly selected palette of ivories and whites, soft yellows, sea-foam and grass greens, grays, baby blues and inks; the too-perfect symmetrical patterns of wetness on concrete; impossible reflections in windows (where is that tree?); impassable moats of bushes, and other strange and subtle alterations in cloud patterns, windows, driveways.

"It's like Rorschach ink images playing out this idea of symmetry throughout architecture to create

harmony or highlight some sense of harmony and beauty. It's a form of no actual meaning and the viewer comes and tries to create sense of meaning," she said.

Merrill often took advantage of street cleaning days to shoot. "I was interested in having these spaces be seen as we'd never seen them. In a place like San Francisco you'd never not see a car -- streets aren't deserted like this. It causes this sense of recent apocalypse, a strange tension, seeing no people and all these perfectly manicured lawns."

At her thesis show in Oakland, Bay Area locals had interesting reactions to these "familiar" places.

"It took them a few photographs to get what was going on. The environments we spend our time in we take for granted; we don't really look. People see it, but they don't really see it. Midway through, it's a

wonderful sort of surprise -- it makes it a little richer," she said.

Film Art Director Andrew Boughton's photos of Mumbai, on the other hand, depict settings extremely real, astonishing in their textures and colors.

"(In India) the colors are all more vibrant É more unexpected. The combinations used in painting the stairwell, for example, are so unusual. As for textures, the humidity and general weather conditions combined with different building materials and different health regulations allow for extreme wall textures to be tolerated," he said.

The scumbly walls are a feast for the senses: teals, creams, sepia, whites, grays, mossy greens, maroon and rust colors are revealed in moldy corners, crumbling layers of paint, brick, plaster and mildew.

"Using photos like these for inspiration we literally in some cases attempt to make direct copies. First by swatching to colors exactly for matching and then painstakingly measuring every stair, newel post, and piece of hardware," he said.

Boughton, who has worked as art director on films such as "National Treasure-Book of Secrets" and "House of Sand and Fog," took the photos while scouting for a film about a westerner who hides in the slums of India. The film eventually had to be scrapped due to budget.

"I have not and probably never would have (traveled in Mumbai), so it was a revelation. As for social climate there exists a 'caste' system, which is a bit hard to understand. The poverty is astounding," he said.

"I did (interact with locals) and it was the most wonderful experience. I was even touched by an "untouchable" a homeless woman and her baby who asked me to buy dried milk and rice for her, because the store owners would not accept money from her hands, even if she had it. It was a profoundly moving experience to help one person in a sea of desperation."

So what's it like being an art director on movies?

"It is a great life working in film. And these photographs show why -- we have a chance to see wonderful, unusual things in faraway places."

The 1078 Gallery, at 820 Broadway, is open at 12:30-5:30 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays. Call 343-1973 for more information.